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Book Review

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Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World. By Zara Anishanslin. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 422 pp. \$45.00.)

This excellent book offers new insights into life in the British Atlantic world and, more intriguingly, demonstrates a different way to do history. *Portrait of a Woman in Silk* is not a conventional art history of an eighteenth-century painting, nor is it a conventional history of commodities (specifically silk) and trade in the British Atlantic. It is also not a conventional work of material culture studies. The current trend in material culture scholarship toward materiality would lead readers to expect a focus on the portrait's materials, size, and weight—not just how its silk was made but how it was made into a dress and worn—but readers will not find that discussion either.

So, what is this book then? In part, it is a set of historical biographies, placing four eighteenth-century lives, connected to and through the titular portrait of a woman in silk, against each other and in the contexts of the places they lived: the silk-workers neighborhood of Spitalfields; the polite spaces of colonial Philadelphia, where wealthy colonial politician-merchants and their families resided; and the home of the portrait's painter, Robert Feke, in colonial New York and Rhode Island. The strength of *Portrait of a Woman in Silk* may lie in its production-to-consumption, life-cycle-of-an-object approach, but I think that misses the point. Indeed, the object itself is largely absent. Rather, Zara Anishanslin uses the portrait of Anne Shippen Willing as an associative trigger. Her observations of the painting are a springboard for her imagination into the British Atlantic world: the silk industry and trade, the lives of silk workers, life in colonial British America, and how all those were connected. If you stare at the painting, you will not find these “hidden histories” actually embedded in its oil, paint, or canvas; rather, the term *embedded* hints at the notion of embedded landscapes put forward by Bernard L. Herman, Dell Upton, and others: landscapes, or in this case paintings of people set against a landscape, comprise both the seen and the unseen; they are embedded with cultural values, ideologies, and meanings.

Appropriately for the period covered in the book, all this is an invocation of early eighteenth-century theories of associative observation as set out in Joseph Addison's essay on Virgil's *Georgics*, “The Pleasures of the Fancy and Imagination,” first published in *The Spectator* in 1712. Anishanslin frequently references these ideas, clearly stating that “by zooming in on a single object, and then zooming out to its many associated meanings, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk* views the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world from multiple perspectives” (p. 21). The book appears contemporary, radical even, but Addison would have loved it.

The conceptualization of this world in the book is problematic. There are contradictions in the articulation of Atlantic culture as more universal than generally recognized in Early American history but, at the same time, more regionally distinct than is recognized in histories that compare Britain and British American characters. A more cohesive view would perhaps be that the British Atlantic world was universally socially hierarchical but also fundamentally regional in its (preindustrial) production and consumption of ideas, values, tastes, and goods. I am also not fully convinced by her argument that the book moves material culture beyond class (or rank) and emulation, as chapters repeatedly set out how the material world framed and maintained the social position of her various actors. However, these are matters of interpretation to be debated among fellow Atlanticists, not inaccuracies, and are of much less interest than the fascinating way the book constructs and accesses history. Do we understand the eighteenth-century Atlantic world better for reading history in this way? For me, the answer is definitely yes.

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